

Message Text

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16

ACTION ARA-20

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FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA

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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 6439

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PN

SUBJ: CIVIC CLUBS AIRING GRIEVANCES AGAINST GOVERNMENT

1) SUMMARY: IN FIRST TIME SINCE TORRIJOS GOVT CAME TO POWER IN 1968 CIVIC CLUBS IN PANAMA ARE OPENLY DEBATING GRIEVANCES AGAINST GOP AND CALLING FOR CREATION OF PERMANENT COUNCIL OF ALL CLUBS TO CONSIDER NATIONAL PROBLEMS.

2) AT ROTARY CLUB MEETING TODAY CLUB PRESIDENT ANNOUNCED BOARD OF DIRECTORS HAD AUTHORIZED 45 MINUTE DEBATE ON GOP ECONOMIC POLICY. HE LAID DOWN RIGID RULES FOR DISCUSSION INCLUDING NO POLITICAL DISCUSSION OR MENTION OF PERSONALITIES. I WAS IN ATTENDANCE BECAUSE I HAVE BEEN MEMBER OF CLUB FOR FOUR YEARS AND WAS UNAWARE THAT ANY SUCH DEBATE WAS PENDING.

3) MINISTER OF COMMERCE WHO IS ALSO CLUB MEMBER WAS PRESENT AND SPOKE BRIEFLY DEFENDING GOP POLICY. THIS IS FIRST TIME SINCE TORRIJOS GOVT ASSUMED POWER THAT ROTARY CLUB HAS DISCUSSED PUBLIC POLICY.

3) CLUB PRESIDENT SAID DISCUSSION HAD BEEN REQUESTED BY CLUB MEMBERS AND SIMILAR DISCUSSION WOULD TAKE PLACE AT
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KIWANIS. ANOTHER SPEAKER SAID EVERY CIVIC CLUB IN

PANAMA INVOLVED.

4) DISCUSSION WAS RESTRAINED BUT SUCCESSIVE SPEAKERS CALLED INTO QUESTION PUBLIC POLICY INCLUDING HOUSING LEGISLATION, CONTROL OVER PRIVATE SCHOOLS, LEGISLATION REGULATING PROFESSIONS, FAILURE TO CONSULT ON LEGISLATION, CENSORSHIP OF PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENTS OF CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, ETC.

5) DISCUSSION TURNED POLITICAL WITH ONE SPEAKER SAYING HE HAD "A GREAT DOUBT" BUT HE REFRAINED FROM SAYING WHAT IT WAS BECAUSE OF THE RESTRICTION ON POLITICAL DISCUSSION. IT WAS CLEAR, HOWEVER, SPEAKER WAS QUESTIONING DOCTRINE AND POLITICAL DIRECTION OF GOP.

6) NEXT SPEAKER COMPLAINED THAT CLUB LIMITED TO DISCUSSING ECONOMIC MATTER BECAUSE IT WOULD BE ACCUSED OF PROTECTING VESTED INTERESTS OF ITS MEMBERS. HE CRITICIZED MINISTER OF GOVT AND JUSTICE FOR TELLING ROTARY CLUB SEVERAL MONTHS AGO THAT FIRST DUTY OF GOVERNMENT WAS SURVIVAL. SUCH A STATEMENT WAS AN "INSULT TO OUR INTELLIGENCE." THE FIRST DUTY OF ANY GOVERNMENT HE SAID WAS TO LOOK AFTER INTERESTS OF CITIZENS. HE CRITICIZED GOP EXPENDITURES FOR ARMS AND INCREASING GN STRENGTH. HE CALLED ON CLUB TO NAME A PERMANENT COUNCIL TO DISCUSS RESTRICTIONS ON PERSONAL LIBERTY, DENIAL OF FREEDOM OF PRESS, DENIAL OF FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY. (AT THIS POINT I TOLD CLUB PRESIDENT I HAD APPOINTMENT AND EXCUSED MYSELF.)

7) COMMENT: FACT THAT ROTARY AND OTHER CLUBS HAVE DEPARTED FROM ACCUSTOMED ROLE AS "CIVIC" CLUBS TO DEBATE NATIONAL ISSUES IS INDICATION OF DEPTH OF CONCERN OF PRIVATE SECTOR OVER ACTIONS AND DIRECTION OF GOP.
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